

Manager Fact Sheet: Employee Exit Interviews

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Introduction:

This fact sheet provides information and recommended best practices to state human resource professionals and managers conducting employee exit interviews.

An agency's main goal is to retain talented employees. Employee exit interviews provide an opportunity to (1) learn how an agency can improve itself; (2) ensure employees leaving feel good about their service; and (3) encourage the employee to stay under new circumstances.

However, exit interviews are a rear-view approach and agency's should not rely solely on this data. Employee focus groups, annual surveys, and other prospective analytical tools can help evaluate retention issues more broadly.

Considerations and Recommendations:

Exit interviews are normally conducted when an employee is terminating employment. Interviews may also be conducted upon an employee's internal transfer. Some employers choose to conduct the interview following the termination to gain additional information without the employee being concerned about retribution.

Exit interview practices vary widely depending on the agency's mission, size, and geographical make-up. Most human resource professionals agree on these three points:

1. The agency should have a formal policy regarding exit interviews.
2. Exit interviews should be reserved for voluntary separations because issues raised by layoffs and terminations for cause require a special approach.
3. The agency should extend the opportunity to all departing employees, not just top performers or long-term employees.

Opinions vary regarding exit interviews, i.e. how formal they should be, whether the exit interview should be voluntary or mandatory, and who should conduct them. These considerations are examined below.

Who should conduct the interview?

A neutral party should conduct the exit interview to gain the employee's confidence and get the most candid answers. Usually, this is someone not involved in the employee's day-to-day supervision or the employee's chain of command. Exit interviews by nature could become confrontational or perfunctory. The interviewer should be experienced and skilled to probe gently for the full truth, to listen actively, and not be overly empathetic. The exit interview can be a very emotional encounter and the interviewer needs to be able to skillfully manage it.

When should the interview be conducted?

Exit interviews should not be scheduled for the employee's final day, and participation should be voluntary. Scheduling the exit interview close to the date the employee provided notice may allow the agency an opportunity to address the reason the employee is leaving and

thereby retain the employee. It also provides an opportunity to review the agency's expectations with regard to confidential records and what information the terminating employee may take with them when they leave.

How should the interview be conducted?

Exit interviews should focus on the agency's most important needs. They can benefit the agency in understanding why employees leave. Ask open-ended questions that focus on:

- initial selection practices;
- the degree to which the job met the employee's expectations;
- benefits;
- training;
- advancement opportunities;
- supervision;
- organizational culture; and
- pay.

The interviewer should assure the terminating employee that they will not be harmed or retaliated against for the information they provided. Explaining to the terminating employee how their remarks will be used and identified may also help reassure the employee.

While assuring the employee's interview information will be protected, the interviewer should not guarantee total confidentiality. Small agencies or agencies with low employee turnover may have difficulty maintaining a terminating employee's comment as confidential. Allegations of discrimination, harassment, criminal behavior, or other legal issues will require some disclosure. The interviewer should explain to the terminating

employee that the agency may have an obligation to act on this type of information.

Interviewers should also do enough probing to determine if the cause for leaving could create potential legal concerns if the employee later decides to file a charge of discrimination or harassment. It could assist the agency if the agency asked these questions and its records indicated the employee made no mention of the concern in the exit interview even though the door was opened by the interviewer.

How formal should the interview be?

Exit interview can range from a casual conversation with note-taking to a standardized list of talking points to a questionnaire or other survey instrument.

How should the interview end?

Finally, say thank you. Thank the terminating employee for their service and let them know they are valued. Leave them feeling good about what they contributed to the employer.

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